

IN THE SHADOWS

ACCOMPANIED CHILDREN ON THE MOVE
AND THEIR MOTHERS IN GREECE
~UNVEILING THEIR STRUGGLES~



PREPARED BY:

NANTINA TSEKERI
&
IRIS PAPPA

FOR DCI GREECE

A message from our Founder and CEO:

'All we wish is to become the lighthouse where children and women can be reminded of their value, dignity and incredible potential. Experience has shown us that only through a trauma-informed approach founded on trust, consistency and high-level expertise the above can happen.

In this direction, we aim to offer them the 'safe space' to place their trauma, needs and future dreams. We, as a team of experts, are there to hear and see them when they feel invisible, but also to take targeted actions towards the realization of their specific rights.

But we cannot do it without YOU.

Help us break the cycle of exclusion and suffering of young children on the move and their mothers, survivors of extreme violence.

This report will navigate you through the challenges our beneficiaries encounter upon arrival to Greece, aiming to shed light to the suffering of some of the most neglected populations of people on the move. The Shadow people.'



Nantina Tsekeri

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OVERVIEW	2
LEGAL FRAMEWORK	4
UNDERTAKING THE PERILOUS JOURNEY	8
THE NUMBERS	10
LIFE UPON ARRIVAL	12
THE VICIOUS CYCLE	24
MOTHERS ON THE MOVE	26
SHADOW CHILDREN	28
IMPACT ON THE CHILD	37
RECOMMENDATIONS	40
WHAT IS MISSING	45
WHERE WE COME IN	49
OUR RESPONSE	50
BREAK THE CYCLE	51
SOURCES & NOTES	54

OVERVIEW

This report presents a **comprehensive overview on the struggles and challenges faced by accompanied children on the move and their mothers in Greece, who in their striking majority are survivors of female genital mutilation, trafficking, exploitation and/ or other extreme forms of violence.**

This report delves into the root causes which allow for marginalization and exclusion to take place. It explores the systematic deficiencies and the complexities that contribute to a vicious cycle of abandonment and exploitation for the target population.

The findings presented in this report are the outcome of primary data collected from our **Child Rights Helpdesk**, as well as, secondary data sources. As regards the primary data collection it involved interviews, focus group discussions and observations conducted with alone **mothers on the move and their children**, who have been recipients of our services at our Child Protection Center. These qualitative research methods aimed to capture their lived experiences, views and challenges in a comprehensive manner.

OVERVIEW

The report underscores the importance of establishing a safe and supportive environment exclusively for refugee mothers and their children that could address their holistic needs by providing simultaneously comprehensive assistance tailored to them. This intervention needs to take the form of tailored psycho-social support, vocational training, curriculum vitae (CV) development, access to educational, cognitive and emotional development opportunities, preparation for enrolling school, healing activities and targeted legal support. Only by focusing on both parties the vicious circle of exclusion can be interrupted. Such initiatives empower child and mother to effectively navigate their complex circumstances and foster their smooth integration into their host communities making thus the prospect of a dignified future life for them a realistic goal.



LEGAL FRAMEWORK

-Children rights

The universal rights of children are codified in a number of legally binding treaties and international standards, most importantly the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most widely ratified human rights treaty and the most comprehensive articulation of the rights of children in international law. **The International Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified by Greece under Law 2101/1992 (Government Gazette A 1992)**

Notwithstanding that all CRC provisions apply to the group of children that is the focus of this Report , the following guiding principles of the CRC and some specific provisions are especially relevant in this conversation .

- **Non-discrimination:** all the rights guaranteed by the CRC must be available to all children without discrimination of any kind (art. 2)
- **Best interests of the child:** the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children (art. 3)
- **Survival:** every child has the right to life, survival and development (art. 6)
- **Right to identity:** every child has the right to preserve their identity, and to be provided assistance and protection when they are deprived of some or all of the elements of their identity (art.8)
- **Protection against violence:** States have to commit to protect children from all forms of violence (art.19) which apply to all settings, including justice systems and proceedings

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

- **Protection of unaccompanied or migrant children:** States commit to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee shall receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of their rights (art. 22)
- **Right to health:** every child has the right to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health and to access to the appropriate facilities and health care services. States should take appropriate measures to ensure the full implementation of this right, including measures for the abolishment of traditional practices that are prejudicial to the health of children (art. 24)
- **Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, and from trafficking:** States commit to protect all children from the exploitative use of children in all forms of sexual exploitation, including prostitution (art. 34), and from the abduction, sale or traffic in children (art. 35)

A hand in a dark jacket points upwards towards a central hexagon labeled 'CHILD RIGHTS'. The background is a grid of hexagons with various terms related to child rights. The grid is overlaid on a blurred image of a person in a blue uniform. The background has a blue-to-orange gradient.

Family

**CHILD
RIGHTS**

Equality

Education

Freedom

Peace

Healthcare

Shelter

Knowledge

Protection

Development

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

-Women Rights

Women's rights, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), are a vital aspect of the broader **human rights discourse**. It was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948, as a common standard for all people and nations to achieve. Subsequently, two key documents have furthered the cause of women's rights within the framework of the UDHR. **The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** functions as an international bill of rights for women, obligating governments to combat gender discrimination and affirming women's access to essential health services, including family planning. It was signed by Greece at the United Nations on 2 March 1982. **It was ratified by law by Parliament on 30 March 1983 and became valid as law of the State as of 30 April 1983.**

The substance of the Convention is based on three interrelated core principles: substantive equality, non-discrimination and State obligation. Additionally, the **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**, established in 1995 at the UN's Fourth World Conference in Beijing, underscored the importance of integrating gender equality and women's rights into all aspects of life.

-Main legislative act on asylum procedures, reception conditions, detention and content of international protection in Greece:

L. 4939/2022 “Ratification of the Code on reception, international protection of third-country nationals and stateless persons, and temporary protection in cases of mass influx of displaced persons;” **4939/2022 incorporates the asylum procedures directive, the reception conditions directive and the qualification directive.**

Read more about the legal framework for asylum seekers in Greece at AIDA by ECRE (European Council on Refugees and Exiles : <https://asylumineurope.org/>



Defence for Children

Greece

Children's Rights Helpdesk

δίπλα στα παιδιά,
- 5 -
υπερασπίζοντας τα
δικαιώματά τους



UNDERTAKING THE PERILOUS JOURNEY

Women and Children on the run

The global refugee crisis has precipitated a significant influx of displaced individuals seeking safety and security in Europe, with Greece still serving as a primary entry point.

In the beginning of 2023 alone, thousands of people on the move have arrived in Greece. **42.3 percent of them were mothers, women and children.** This number is expected to keep increasing in the coming years due to the armed conflicts and climate change.

Forced marriages, armed conflicts, child recruitment, female genital mutilation and other forms of gender-based violence, extreme poverty, post Covid-19 context, as well as, **environmental causes** rooted to the global warming, are some of the main push factors that have forced these women and children to flee their countries and reach Greece in search of refuge.



Undoubtedly becoming a person on the run is by abstract a very dangerous life circumstance. However, when you are a woman, and in most of the cases in their early 20s, this ‘running effort’ ends up life threatening.

The 85 % of our women population, are survivors of trafficking and exploitation. Most of their children, are born as a result of theirs mother's rape.

UNDERTAKING THE PERILOUS JOURNEY

Women and Children on the run

In reality, the treacherous path they take, often through irregular and dangerous migration routes, increases their vulnerability. Many are forced to entrust their fate to smugglers and agents who promise to help them reach Europe safely, others are targeted and groomed by the trafficking networks once still in their home countries.

In all scenarios, once under the control of these networks, the situation takes a grim turn. Women most likely find themselves subjected to **physical and sexual exploitation**, forced labor, and debt bondage. Traffickers use coercion, threats, and violence to **maintain control over their victims**. Often, the debt incurred from the smuggling fee becomes a tool of manipulation, leaving women and their **children trapped in a cycle of exploitation and unable to break free**.

In transit, women and children are frequently **confined in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions**, enduring **immense hardship** during their journey. They are **exposed to risks like physical abuse, sexual assault, and even death**. Children witness distressing scenes.

They **endure long hours of walking**, often without access to basic necessities, as they strive to reach safer regions. Crossing seas in **overcrowded and unsafe boats** puts them at risk of drowning and other life-threatening situations with lifelong mental impact on them for the years to come, if they come.

**Tragic Pylos Shipwreck
Over 600 Lives Lost,
Including Children and
Mothers
June 2023, Greece**



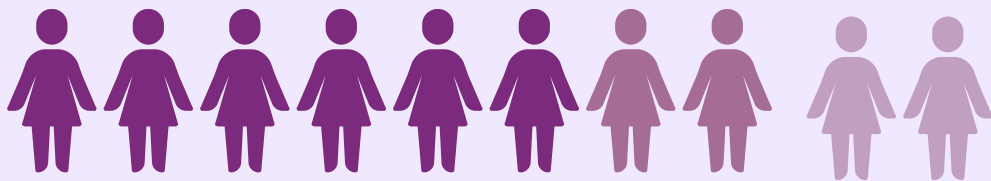
THE NUMBERS

From 2015-2023, more than 2 million **refugees** arrived in Greece.

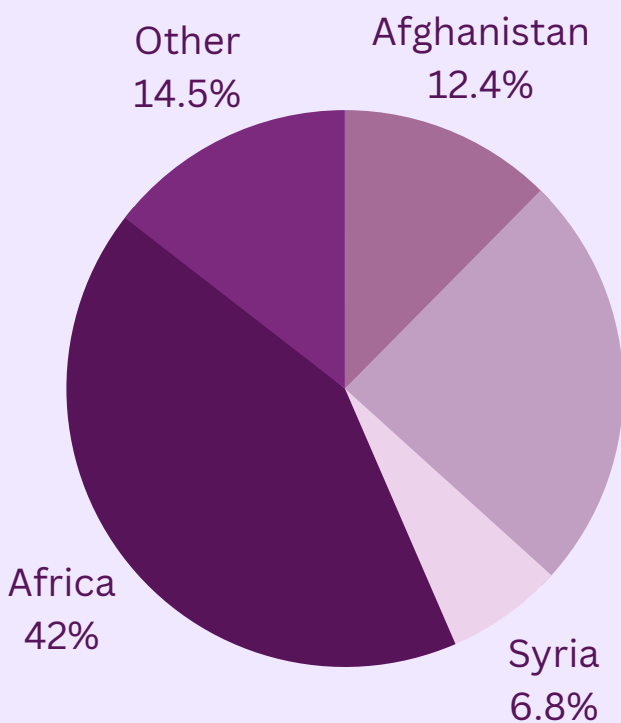
It is estimated that more than **20,000 children on the move** are currently present in Greece. Of them:



**ACCOMPANIED
CHILDREN**



COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN





“

There was **no other choice**. I had to take my three girls and run away from Afghanistan. The Taliban were killing people and taking girls as sex slaves from the villages. We arrived here with the hope that my girls will be safe...but we feel like ghosts in a city of millions of people.

Aziza from Afghanistan

”

LIFE UPON ARRIVAL

Mothers and children in despair

The plight of refugee mothers and children upon their arrival in Greece is marked by a **multitude of challenges, including the possibility of forced separation between the mother and child** but also intricate circumstances that significantly impact their well-being and prospects for integration. Among these challenges are **legal uncertainties, invisibility, serious mental health problems, exposure to exploitation and trafficking, homelessness, development delays and lack of access to education for children, lack of vocational training and unemployment for mothers.**

Children and mothers live in the shadows for certain reasons:

- **Great difficulty in registering officially for protection**
- **Failure to receive protection due to lack of legal support and victim identification**
- **No integration and support to recognized refugees**



WHAT LIVE IN THE SHADOWS MEANS?

Abuse and Exploitation

Homelessness

Trafficking

Lack of Legal Documentation

Emotional Despair

No Medical and Psychosocial support

No Access to Labor or Vocational
Training

No Access to Formal Education

A Vicious Cycle of Exclusion and
Poverty

Detention

Forced Separation of mother and child

Lost Childhoods

LIFE UPON ARRIVAL

No Access to Asylum Procedures

To seek asylum, they have to pre-register online and then proceed to one of the designated camps. However, the process of securing an appointment for lodging an asylum application in Greece is plagued by significant delays, taking an average of 3-4 months to schedule. Additionally, the online platform lacks inclusivity, excluding a number of languages, which renders it ineffective for applicants from diverse countries and backgrounds.

For a significant period of time, the online platform was non-functional due to technical reasons, which has halted appointment scheduling since May 2023. During the shutdown, people could not lodge requests for asylum, register subsequent applications, or renew their asylum cards.



This absence of official registration is translated into a lack of legal documentation, protection and access to social services, leaving hundreds of women and their children vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking.

LIFE UPON ARRIVAL

Life as an Asylum Seeker

For those who manage to successfully register and apply for international protection, their journey is marked by a series of formidable challenges as well. The ESTIA housing scheme, established in 2015 to support vulnerable asylum seekers, was abruptly terminated at the close of 2022. This sudden change in policy left hundreds of vulnerable asylum seekers, including mothers and their children, who were previously residing in these shelters, **in a dire situation.**

Many of them were forcibly evicted and relocated to **isolated closed controlled camps** situated far away from urban areas. These camps lack specific safe spaces and appropriate conditions for women and their children, resembling to detention facilities. The absence of adequate security and the remote, isolated locations exacerbate the challenges faced by these individuals, compromising their safety and well-being.



For all asylum seekers arriving now, the only available housing option is these detention - like facilities. Their capacity though is often limited, with many already operating at full occupancy, unable to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of asylum seekers seeking refuge.

LIFE UPON ARRIVAL

Life as an Asylum Seeker

At the same time these closed controlled camps, face a significant shortage of essential services. Often, there is a troubling **lack of food provisions**, leaving residents, especially children, in precarious situations regarding their nutritional needs and overall well-being. Safety conditions within these camps raise serious concerns, posing an elevated risk, particularly to the well-being of children.



Additionally, since their inception they have been severely **understaffed and under-resourced**, while in most cases lacking vital medical, legal and psycho-social personnel. Within these camps, there is **a lack of learning courses or vocational training programs** for the mothers. The lack of acquired skills and education significantly hampers their ability to secure employment and subsequently afford rental accommodations, when the time comes to leave the Camps. Regarding children's education, it is observed that children face a prolonged waiting period before they can access school.

LIFE UPON ARRIVAL

Rejected Asylum Claims

Another significant reason leading to social exclusion and invisibility is the rejected asylum applications. Our data shows, however, that the majority **of the rejections received, could have been overturned if these mothers had had access to proper legal support and victim of violence identification.**

The majority of the mothers applying for asylum are survivors of **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), trafficking, torture, and other forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV).** These women have to report on these topics in detail to the asylum authorities, even if it goes against **their cultural imprint.** Indeed, in many cases, women speak indirectly or not at all about their experiences, leading to their applications being rejected. **This phenomenon demonstrates the importance of trauma-informed legal information, support, and representation.**

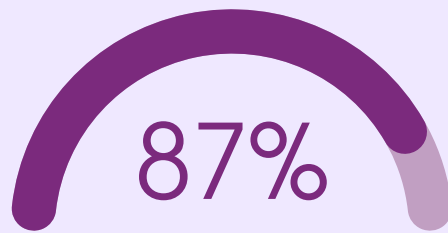


Other times, women do speak up about their harmful experiences, as well as, for the high risk of their children's imposition to the same atrocities, however, there is no victim identification procedure in place to foster their asylum cases.

LIFE UPON ARRIVAL

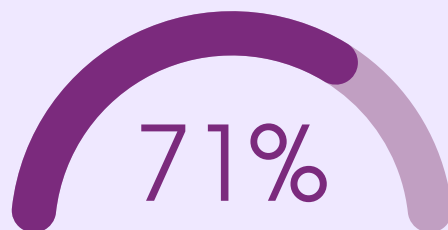
Rejected Asylum Claims

Since 2018, we have managed to overturn the asylum rejections of 87% of our mother and child population



I felt ashamed to speak about my rape and sexual exploitation during the asylum interview. I was afraid that they will judge me and humiliate me.

Vanessa, 19 years old from Congo



71 % were recognized as survivors of torture and/or trafficking

LIFE UPON ARRIVAL

Rejected Asylum Claims

In the examination of asylum applications, a notable disparity exists between **accompanied and unaccompanied children, particularly regarding the analytical legal framework employed.**

Specifically, there is a significant gap in considering the child's individual circumstances and best interest, and conducting an in-depth analysis of the relevant provisions outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).



This omission in the assessment process, undermines the comprehensive evaluation of the child's unique situation and rights, neglecting crucial factors that should inform decisions regarding the child's protection and well-being. In many instances children are exposed to the risk of early marriage and FGM due to the rejections received by their parents.

LIFE UPON ARRIVAL

Accepted Asylum Claims

Even for the mothers and children, who do manage to obtain refugee status, **exploitation, homelessness and exclusion** are the aftermath of the positive decision. The mothers together with their children, upon receiving the positive decision, are being **evicted from the reception facilities or the camps** in case they were living there, before they could even access employment opportunities and social welfare programs, leaving them **stranded without the necessary resources for sustainable integration**.



Consequently, they become trapped in a vicious cycle of vulnerability, leaving them susceptible to exploitation, trafficking and marginalization.

PAULINE'S STORY

'I can breathe again'

Pauline is a single mother of three children from Congo. Back in her country she was kidnapped, placed into detention and suffered torture. Due to all these hardships, Pauline developed severe depression and psychological issues. Her trauma deepened even further when she realized the people that were supposed to 'help' her leave her country of origin were, in fact, her traffickers.

In Greece, her asylum application was rejected, because as she later told us, she did not have the strength to vocalize her story and share her experiences. P. for a long period of time and while in Greece, did not receive any legal or psychological aid. The final straw in her life was when, after a brief hospitalization, she realized her children were taken from her.

For one and a half years, Pauline did not know where her children were, whether they were dead or alive. When she first came into our offices, she was desperate, the grief of losing her children was a fact she could not handle.



PAULINE'S STORY

After conducting a 'needs and risk assessment', our team of experts started drafting a holistic plan in order to support her. We first had to guarantee her access to basic rights that she was deprived of, due to the rejection of the asylum claim, while at the same time we started looking for her children and working on reopening her asylum case.

Her children were located after some months in an orphanage, shortly before being put up for adoption. With our intervention, we managed to pause the procedure of adoption and start the one for reuniting them with their mother. In the meantime, our psychologist started working with her, using the clinically proven 'Narrative exposure therapy' technique, ideal for her case. Only after a few weeks, Pauline reached a more stable emotional state, developed trauma response skills and managed to focus more effectively in her asylum procedure.



With our ongoing support, Pauline has attained refugee status, secured a full-time job in a hotel, while prioritizing her mental health. Despite these successes, the road to reunification with her children remains challenging. Reclaiming custody demands further legal support and representation through a complex legal process. She requires stable housing that complies with specific requirements, including a two-bedroom apartment. Additionally, sustaining her sessions with the psychologist is crucial, and ongoing support will be indispensable once she regains custody of her children. The journey ahead is filled with obstacles, but our dedication to her cause persists, ensuring she receives the necessary support to bring her family back together.

LIFE UPON ARRIVAL

Systemic Failures and the Unlawful Separation of Mothers and Children

The cases of unlawful separation between mothers and their children have regrettably become a recurrent and deeply concerning phenomenon within the framework of our work. It is evident that numerous instances of such separation are precipitated by a mix of distressing factors, including the homelessness or extreme poverty endured by mothers, their compromised mental health, or the necessity for brief hospitalization. In these dire circumstances, temporary decisions are made by the Juvenile Prosecutors to separate mothers from their children, as a means of safeguarding the welfare of the latter. However, many times these temporary decisions, driven by a perceived need to safeguard the children's welfare, often unintentionally transform into **permanent separations**.

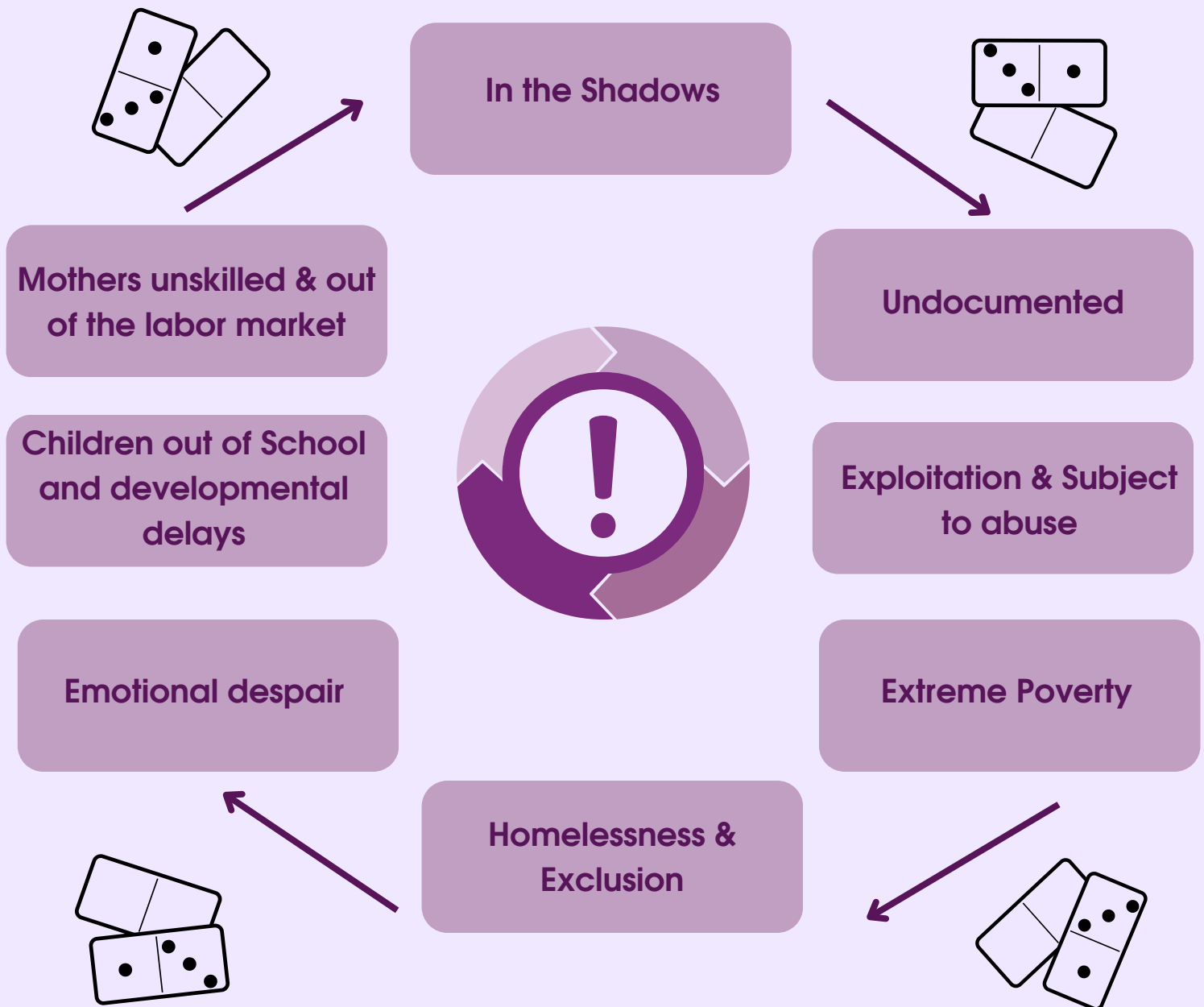
A closer examination reveals the inadequacies and flaws inherent in the child protection system, case management procedures, and inter-agency communication among relevant authorities.

The absence of a comprehensive approach to assessing the unique needs and circumstances of each case engenders a regrettable outcome wherein children - who should remain in the care of their mothers unless there is a great reason and/or it is assessed that is not in their best interest- end up to orphanages, ultimately paving the way for their potential adoption.

The lack of adequate follow-up and legal support leaves these mothers in a state of uncertainty, making it exceedingly challenging for them to track the whereabouts and well-being of their children. Without the necessary legal assistance and advocacy, these mothers find themselves in a disheartening situation, where the possibility of reunification with their children becomes increasingly difficult.

Watch here the story of Fufu: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9kvsF-SNFo&t=318s>

THE VICIOUS CYCLE: A DOMINO EFFECT



"I need to learn the language and find a job, but what about my child?"

-Vanessa, 21 year-old from Congo

'I feel hopeless'

- Santu

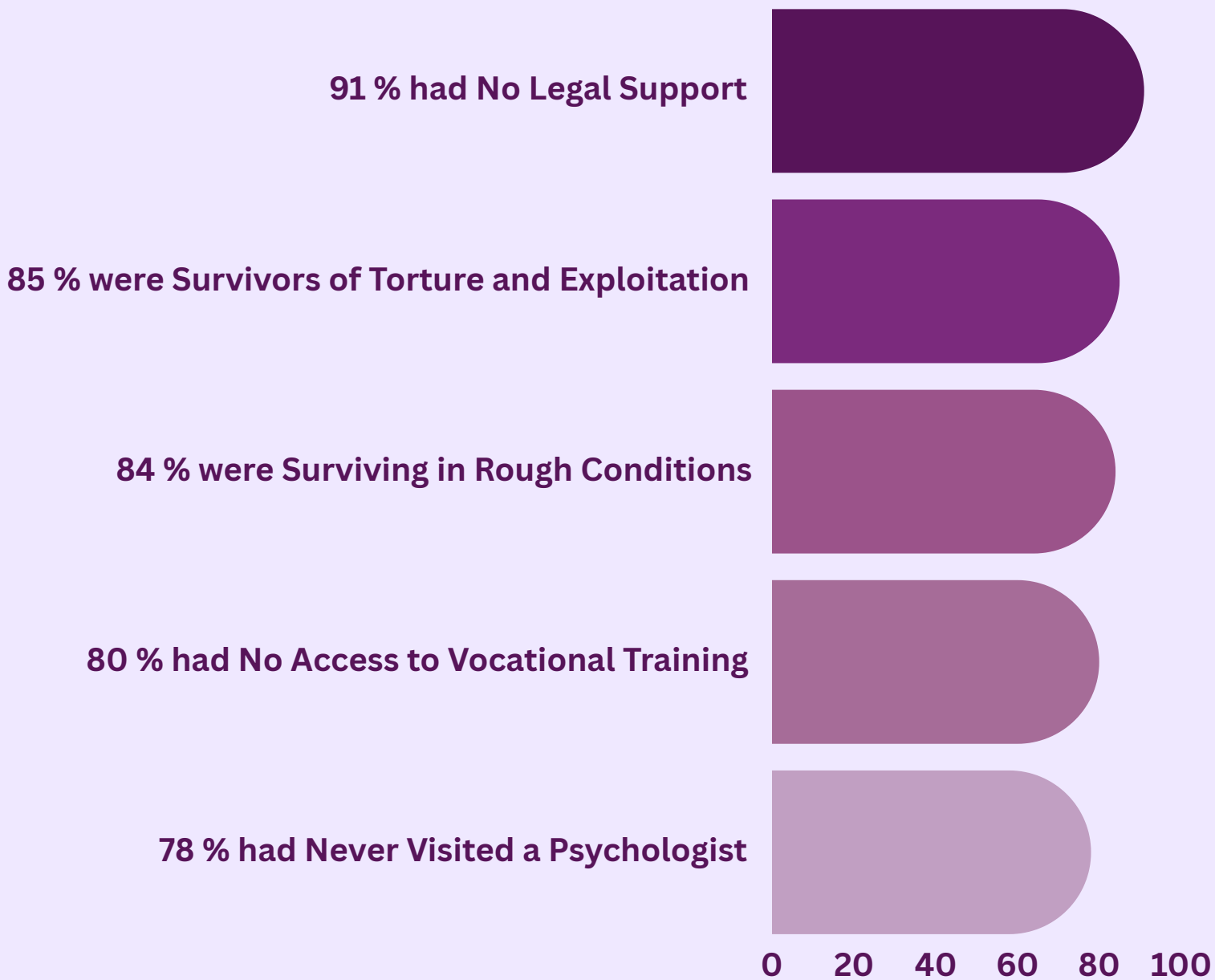


'I am in Greece for 3 years now. I received a rejection in the first degree, but with the support of DCI-Greece, I am now a recognised refugee. All these years, due to my rejection, I was sleeping with my daughter in an apartment with other families. **It was not so safe there** but I did not have money to rent a place. Now, that I have legal documents I cannot find a job because for so long I could not attend any course or training. There was **no place that could occupy my child at the same time.**

My girl is now turned 5, so she was registered at school, but she does not want to go, because she cannot speak Greek at all. There was no available courses for her so as to be prepared. I feel hopeless.'

MOTHERS ON THE MOVE

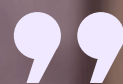
OF THE MOTHERS VISITED OUR CENTER
DURING 2023



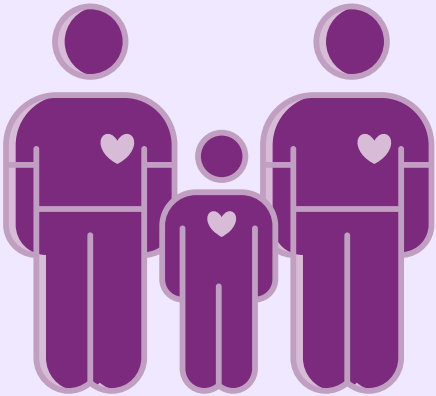


I arrived in Greece four months ago with my two month-old baby. From the moment I arrived in Greece, I live homeless outside of a church because I don't have documents. I cannot book appointment with asylum office and apply for asylum. **The most difficult part is during the night.** I try not to fell asleep so as to protect my child.

-Vanessa, 21 year-old from Congo



SHADOW CHILDREN



Accompanied children are not excused from this hell. They are condemned to the same atrocities as their mothers.



The majority of these children do not attend school, nor receive any medical or psycho-social support. Most of the time they are malnourished, suffering from serious mental health issues, trapped into invisibility with no access to education and they are often forced to witness the abuse and exploitation their mothers are subjected to.

SHADOW CHILDREN

Of the accompanied children who visited our center since the beginning of 2023



91%

HAD SEVERE
DEVELOPMENTAL AND
EMOTIONAL ISSUES



95%

DID NOT
GO
TO SCHOOL



85%

LIVING ON THE STREETS OR IN
SHARED APARTMENTS WITH
STRANGERS.



72%

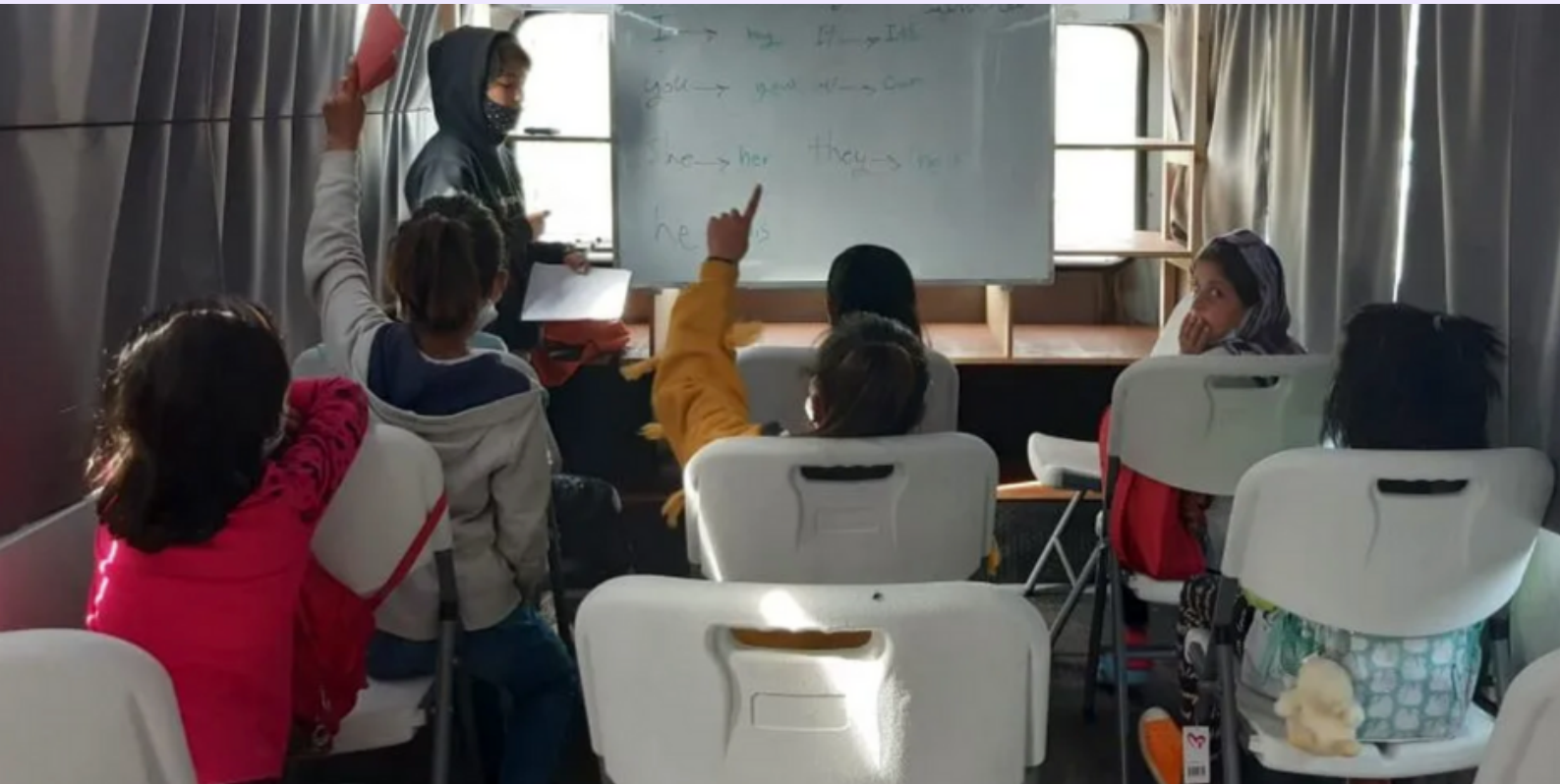
DID NOT HAVE ACCESS TO
DOCTOR OR A
PSYCHOLOGIST



SHADOW CHILDREN

...and their Educational Challenges in Greece

Every academic year, only the
42% enroll in schools



According to the Greek national education system, every child from the age of four needs to be at school. However, this is not guaranteed to the case of displaced children. In the absence of verifiable documentation regarding their legal residence, since the majority of them are officially homeless together with their mothers, very often encounter obstacles when attempting to enroll in educational institutions. Additionally, the lack of legal identification documents, although not set as a prerequisite by law, it frequently impedes their access to school enrollment.

Apart from the above challenges, notable delays have been identified in the formal education enrollment process for the children residing in the camps.

SHADOW CHILDREN

The plight of preschool children

Children up to five years old make a huge percentage of the number of children on the move. However, they are the ones to experience the effect of their invisibility at its highest.



The challenges associated with accessing education are further compounded for children in preschool years. In Greece, if a child is between two and five years old, their parents have the option to seek placement in a child day care center, which may be operated by local municipalities. However, the availability of such centers is severely limited anyway for the Greek community, leading to a scarcity of spaces for enrollment and seeking solutions in the private sector.

SHADOW CHILDREN

However, a placement in a private daycare does not stand as an eligible option for the displaced children.

As a result of this situation, these children are trapped even deeper into their dire living conditions, becoming all the more marginalized. This has a profound impact on their cognitive and emotional development and exacerbates their vulnerability, making it almost impossible to keep up with the school later if lucky enough to enroll. Another detrimental effect of it, is the extra difficulty it adds to their single mothers who are struggling to get out of the shadows and attend vocational trainings and emotional support.



Drop Outs

For those children fortunate enough to register in preschools or primary schools, the hurdles don't end there. Many of them end up dropping out due to a profound lack of readiness. Without proper preschool education, children struggle to keep up with their peers and schoolmates, leading to disappointment and disengagement from the educational system.

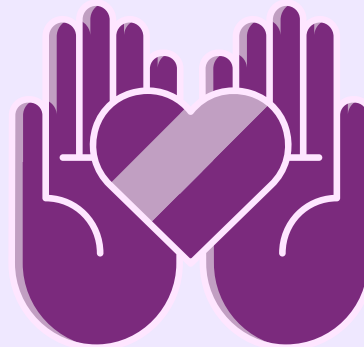
SHADOW CHILDREN

OF THE ACCOMPANIED CHILDREN WHO VISITED OUR CENTER SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 2023, DID NOT HAVE ACCESS TO FORMAL EDUCATION

95%



"I wish my child could go to school. I want her to do better than me"



There is an urgent need for these children to be given opportunities to participate in educational programs that not only prepare them for formal schooling but also foster their cognitive and emotional development.

Deprived of regular access to education and isolated from interaction with their peers, they are denied crucial opportunities for cognitive and socio-emotional development.

SHADOW CHILDREN

EMOTIONAL DESPAIR

The **trauma** endured by refugee children encompasses an abstruse and complex set of experiences, extending beyond the hardships faced in their countries of origin. Of particular concern is the distressing reality that these children **often bear witness to the systemic abuse and exploitation inflicted upon their mothers**, compounding their own traumatic encounters.

Additionally, their **exposure to extreme poverty, exclusion and undignified living conditions** has far-reaching consequences, significantly impacting their mental health and well-being.

A range of adverse psychological outcomes are experienced by children on the move, including heightened levels of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and disordered attachment patterns. The witnessing of their mothers' victimization further contributes to their psychological distress, as they grapple with feelings of **helplessness, fear, and guilt**. These experiences can profoundly shape their cognitive and emotional development.

The disrupted social structures in the refugee context compounds the challenges faced by these children. The resulting social isolation intensifies their feelings of loneliness and alienation, amplifying their vulnerability to mental health disorders.



SHADOW CHILDREN

Dual Realities



Distinct treatment and support systems exist for accompanied and unaccompanied children on the move in Greece, with unaccompanied children often benefiting from increased assistance.

Dedicated shelters are specifically designated for unaccompanied children, ensuring a **safer environment** that caters to their unique needs. These shelters offer **essential services** encompassing specific activities, comprehensive healthcare provisions, and psycho-social support mechanisms to address their **distinct emotional and psychological challenges** while supporting their enrollment in school.



Accompanied children experience a limited recognition of their individual rights, as their well-being and access to dedicated support systems are contingent upon the status and treatment of their mothers by the state.

LEYLA'S STORY

"I shudder at the idea that we will have to be on the streets again. I feel that **my life is at a dead end.**"

Leyla* is one of our **youngest asylum seekers** at the moment. Her mother, Flore*, fled Sierra Leone due to serious threats against her life. Leyla and her mother are **homeless and unregistered** wandering in Athens, invisible. Like many other minors, she is one of the "shadow children" that we regularly encounter.

At the moment, Leyla and her mother cannot apply for international protection nor receive legal documents, because the Greek asylum database platform has been non-functional since May. **She and her mother will remain unseen** for an unknown period of time, without any State provision for their needs.

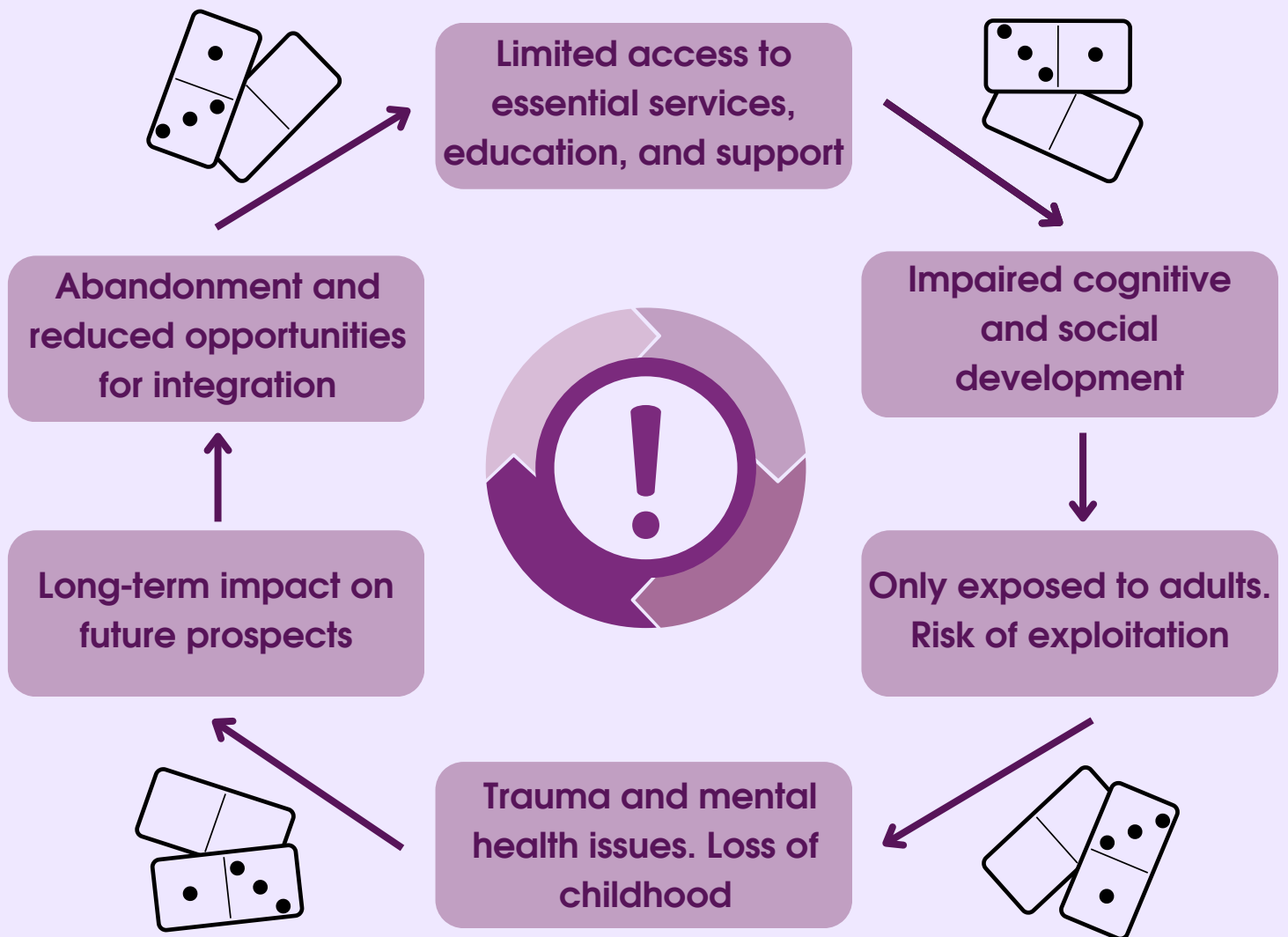


Leyla had to witness the rape of her mother, while she was exploited by the criminal networks

If Leyla had been unaccompanied, she would have had a **better fate** within the reception system. The fact that she arrived with her single mother, a survivor of trafficking, was what made her **unseen as a child in need of urgent protection and care.**

Due to our intervention, Leyla and her mother will be transferred to a safe place that can host them. But only for a limited period of time. **Flore dreams of a better future.** She says that she wants to start learning the language, and look for a job but is **worried about her child.** She does not have anyone here that could trust with Leyla.

IMPACT ON THE CHILD



"For a very long time, my children, until they reached the age of six so they could attend primary school, had to live inside a house without being able to attend any activities. Now, in school, I see their great efforts and struggles to keep up with all. It is difficult for them both to follow the class, but also to socialise with their peers"

-Naminata, 31 year-old from Cote d'Ivoire

RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenges faced by displaced mothers and their children, who often find themselves on the outskirts of society, are complex and interconnected. Our recommended policies aim not only to reduce their difficulties, but rather, to create a society that is more inclusive and equitable. This vision entails the upholding of the dignity and rights of all individuals, irrespective of their asylum-seeking status. Moreover, these policies serve as a blueprint for societal cohesion, and the overall well-being of these marginalized populations. Through the instrumentalization of these policies, we may lay the foundations for a more just and compassionate society, one that cherishes the agency and fundamental rights of all its members.

The following recommendations include the actions/solutions proposed, and address:

- **Professionals and practitioners working in the asylum system at all levels: managers, trainers, public servants, private professionals**
- **Law and policy makers**
- **Communities and the media**

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

ENHANCING ASYLUM PROCEDURES

The essential improvement of the asylum system should place a strong emphasis on a multi-faceted approach that incorporates the unique needs and vulnerabilities of those seeking refuge, particularly focusing on vulnerable populations such as refugee mothers and their children who have endured trafficking, torture, exploitation, and other forms of abuse.

-Comprehensive Assessment Protocols and Guidelines Development

- State authorities should establish trauma informed assessment protocols, incorporating multidisciplinary and inclusive tools. These protocols need to consider the diverse experiences and traumatic backgrounds of refugee mothers, survivors of trafficking, torture, and exploitation, with a focus on relevant characteristics like gender. Furthermore, these assessment tools should encompass sensitive language and communication standards, ensuring cultural competence and trauma-informed services for these particularly vulnerable survivors.
- Develop trauma-informed guidelines for assessing the unique needs of accompanied children. These guidelines should underscore the individuality of each child and the necessity of recognizing their independence. Assessments must acknowledge their distinct experiences and needs separately from those of their parents throughout every stage of the asylum procedures, always considering their best interests.

-Free legal support and access to information at all stages of the Asylum Procedures.

- Ensure that all refugee mothers and their children receive adequate free legal support and representation during the asylum procedures, including subsequent asylum applications.
- Promote legal education and awareness among the refugee population to empower them in understanding the asylum procedures, their rights and responsibilities.

-Improvement of administrative procedures and on going support

- An essential component of asylum system enhancement involves, at the same time, the improvement of administrative procedures with a focus on reducing lengthy processing times. Particular attention should also be placed on the quality and efficiency of vulnerability assessments that should be conducted without any exception from the outset of the asylum process, but also throughout the asylum process. This is imperative to thoroughly comprehend and address the specific challenges faced by this population at different periods, while consistently upholding the independent status of each child throughout every phase of the asylum process.

ENSURE ACCESS TO HEALTH AND SOCIAL RIGHTS THROUGHOUT THE ASYLUM PROCESS

-Psychological Support

- Develop and promote psychological support programs tailored to address the trauma and stress experienced by refugee mothers and their children who are survivors of trafficking, torture, FGM, abuse, and exploitation.

-Diverse Housing Options for Vulnerable Asylum Seekers

- Housing options for vulnerable asylum seekers, particularly refugee mothers and their children. Refugee camps should serve as temporary solutions. It is essential to provide alternative shelter arrangements to ensure both safety and facilitate the integration of these vulnerable populations. Emergency shelters, equipped to address immediate safety concerns, should be made available for those asylum seekers in urgent need.

-Strengthen Access to Education for refugee children

- **Inclusive Enrollment:** School directorates should be issued strict directives to ensure the enrollment of all children, **regardless of their residence, legal status, or the timing of their arrival.**
- **Raising Awareness:** Awareness raising to refugee communities so as to encourage school enrollment within refugee and migrant families. and access to administrative support
- **Guarantee children's school attendance** by actively addressing and removing barriers, including transportation challenges, scheduling conflicts, and staffing issues. Create an inclusive and welcoming school environment.

3

Capacity Building and Specialization of Professionals

- **Continuous Training and Capacity Building:** All professionals involved in the welfare of children within the asylum and administrative justice system, should be provided ongoing training. These should focus on enhancing their understanding of the unique challenges faced by refugee mothers and their children, who are often survivors of trafficking, torture, FGM, abuse, and exploitation.
- **Gender and Trauma Informed Sensitivity Trainings:** The trainings should place particular emphasis on gender sensitivity and trauma-informed approaches. This is crucial as many refugee mothers and children in this context have experienced extreme forms of violence and abuse, making it imperative for professionals to be well-equipped to deal with such cases.



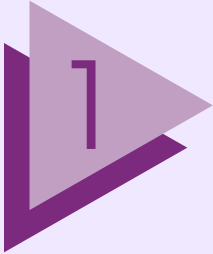
- **Specific Needs of Survivors:** Training should also encompass an understanding of the specific needs of survivors of trafficking, torture, FGM, abuse, and exploitation. This knowledge is essential for professionals to provide effective and compassionate support to these vulnerable individuals.
- **Cultural Competency:** Cultural competency and sensitivity should be integrated into the training to ensure professionals understand and respect the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of the refugee mothers and children they may work with.
- **Child-Centered Approach:** Professionals should be trained to adopt a child-centered approach that prioritizes the well-being and best interests of the children, taking into account their traumatic experiences and unique vulnerabilities.
- **Human Rights and Legal Frameworks:** Professionals should also receive training on relevant human rights standards and legal frameworks that pertain to refugee protection and the rights of survivors of trafficking, torture, FGM, abuse, and exploitation.



It is imperative to establish an ongoing system of risk and individual assessment, a mechanism through which mothers and their children receive continual support tailored to their distinct needs. It should encompass ongoing risk assessments and ways of mitigation, intervention, and the promotion of holistic well-being. This approach seeks to support mothers and their children in their pursuit of a secure and prosperous future.



WHAT IS MISSING



A safe space for legal support and healing which could accommodate both mother and child

Vocational Trainings, skills development and support to access the labor market



A holistic program to support their children's emotional and cognitive development so they can later enroll to school

A fair chance to integration and rebuilding a life



... and all these in the same space

WHAT IS MISSING

We asked our beneficiaries what they felt was missing from the various support systems in Athens, and they expressed the **urgent need for a safe space** where they could **compose themselves, heal, receive guidance and feel protected holistically**. They underscored their **imminent need** to receive all these services at once in a place which provides both for them and their children simultaneously. Otherwise, it will **hamper their efforts** and they will **fail to keep up**. They also mentioned, their **difficulty in attending sporadic support programs** and having to **share their past and traumatic experiences** again and again.

Lastly, they underlined that **their children's needs** are highly overlooked and not prioritized. They see them **suffering** and they **fear** that they will **never be able to attend school and live a secure life**.



WHERE WE COME IN

At DCI-Greece, we fill these gaps by offering a holistic approach, providing protection, legal and psycho-social support to these women and their children via our **Global Awarded Children's Rights Helpdesk**.

We exist to offer a safe space for our beneficiaries, who trust us with their stories, needs, fears, and hopes. We also act as a watchdog of the systemic deficiencies that lead these people to live in the shadows. We also see ourselves as mediators between our beneficiaries and the Authorities in order to bring a structural change.

Our team of experts operates based on scientific protocols and employs a trauma informed approach to all services delivered. We see ourselves as an actor who can bring restoration in these people's soul by 'seeing' and 'hearing' them truly and acting on that.



Through our intervention, we aim to bring children and mothers from a state of extreme violence into a place of safety, peace and visibility.

OUR RESPONSE

Holistic Approach

Legal Aid/ Case Management

Psychological and Healing Support

Preparation to enroll school

Vocational Training and Job finding

Cognitive and emotional child development support

Language Courses

Access to social services

Empowerment and Community Building

Basic Needs (Housing, Food, Transportation)



This approach recognizes the interdependence between the state of mother and child in escaping marginalization. At the same it sets at the heart of the intervention the legal and psycho-social support as a whole without scattered provision of services.

BREAK THE CYCLE

Help us break the cycle and support the Stepping Stone Academy, a safe and supportive environment exclusively for migrant mothers and their children.

The Stepping Stone Academy, as an expansion of our current Helpdesk aims to foster the personal growth and stability of both mother and child aiming to make them self sustainable in future.

By establishing a **safe space** that provides comprehensive assistance, varying from **legal aid and protection services, psychological and healing support, to educational and vocational training opportunities**, we can **empower** these women to effectively navigate their complex circumstances, reach safety, **ensure their smooth integration** into society by supporting them to become self-sustainable.

The success of this program lays with the fact that we aim to provide for their children too, by creating a nurturing environment where mothers can heal and focus on their personal development while resting in peace that their children are also well cared for and engaging in **age-appropriate psychosocial activities simultaneously**. Establishing spaces where these children can come together, interact, and form social connections is essential for their overall well-being.

By providing trauma-informed services to both mothers and children, we can help mitigate the detrimental effects of their trauma and foster their overall well-being and successful integration into society.



The provision of structured activities and recreational opportunities will create a nurturing environment for children. This will ensure their safety, well-being, and holistic development while their mothers participate in empowerment activities, fostering a sense of security and enabling mothers to focus on their personal growth and integration.

OUR STEPPING STONE ACADEMY

TRANSFORMING THE LIVES OF DISPLACED CHILDREN AND MOTHERS WHO LIVE INVISIBLE AMONGST US, EXPOSED TO LIFE THREATENING CONDITIONS



BREAK THE CYCLE

You can support our cause by donating here:

Paypal account: [paypal.me/defenceforchildrengr](https://www.paypal.me/defenceforchildrengr)

Or

IBAN: GR1902603670000310200518604

DEFENCE FOR CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL-ELLINIKO TMIMA

Swift: ERBKGRAA

Bank: Eurobank



SOURCES AND NOTES

**The names in the stories have been changed for safety reasons.*

Asylum Information Database (AIDA), European Council of Refugees and Exiles,
<https://asylumineurope.org/>

Greek Refugee Council - Food Insecurity Experienced by Refugees, Asylum Seekers,
Migrants, and Undocumented People in Greece
<https://www.gcr.gr/en/ekdoseis-media/reports/item/2138-being-hungry-in-europe>

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL Seeking Asylum in Greece: Women and Unaccompanied
Children Struggle to Survive,
<https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2020/2/21/seeking-asylum-greece-women-unaccompanied-children-struggle-survive>

UNHCR Initial Assessment Report: Protection Risks for Women and Girls in the
European Refugee and Migrant Crisis, [https://www.unhcr.org/media/33233?
utm_source=Joint+UNHCR-UNFPA-WRC+Press+Release++20+January+2016+-
+Report+warns+refugee+women+on+the+move+in+Eu&utm_medium=email&utm_ter
m=Hauenste%40unhcr.org&utm_content=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.unhcr.org%2F569f
8f419.html&utm_campaign=](https://www.unhcr.org/media/33233?utm_source=Joint+UNHCR-UNFPA-WRC+Press+Release++20+January+2016+-+Report+warns+refugee+women+on+the+move+in+Eu&utm_medium=email&utm_term=Hauenste%40unhcr.org&utm_content=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.unhcr.org%2F569f8f419.html&utm_campaign=)

The struggle of Afghan single mothers in Greece - R.S.A.
<https://rsaegan.org/en/the-struggle-of-afghan-single-mothers-in-greece/>

Briefing Paper on the Situation of Refugee and Migrant Women,
[https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-
content/uploads/2015/04/WomensRights_BriefingPaper_Greece_Updated_20Jan20
17.pdf](https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/WomensRights_BriefingPaper_Greece_Updated_20Jan2017.pdf)

Human Rights Watch Report on Greece, [https://www.hrw.org/world-
report/2022/country-chapters/greece](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/greece)

ENNHRI Greek National Report, [http://ennhri.org/wp-
content/uploads/2021/07/Greek-National-Report.pdf](http://ennhri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Greek-National-Report.pdf)

Report of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe,
[https://rm.coe.int/report-on-the-visit-to-greece-from-25-to-29-june-2018-by-
dunja-mijatov/16808ea5bd](https://rm.coe.int/report-on-the-visit-to-greece-from-25-to-29-june-2018-by-dunja-mijatov/16808ea5bd)

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR ANY QUESTIONS RELATED TO THE REPORT
PLEASE CONTACT:

Nantina Tsekeri
DIRECTOR AND CEO
nantinatsekeri.dci@gmail.com

OR

Iris Pappa
COORDINATOR OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS HELPDESK
irispappa.dci@gmail.com

LEARN MORE ABOUT US:



DEFENCE FOR CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL - GREECE



DEFENCEFORCHILDRENGR



[HTTPS://WWW.DEFENCEFORCHILDRENGREECE.ORG/](https://www.defenceforchildrengreece.org/)



OFFICE NUMBER: 0030 211 413 66 64

